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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 6707
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 4771
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3436
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0457
RUEHNW/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3528
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0513
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2608
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7272
RUEHBFI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5034
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1678
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000057

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/11/2017

TAGS: PTER PGOV MOPS PREL CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN DEFENSE SECRETARY REITERATES COMMITMENT
TO A POLITICAL SOLUTION

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa told Ambassador on January 10 that Army Commander Fonseka had been misquoted, and that the GSL would not take the fight to North after pushing the LTTE out of the East. Gothabaya insisted the GSL wants a peaceful solution to the conflict, not an extended war. He noted that the President expects to receive a devolution proposal by late January, which would then have to be discussed with the UNP and others. The Ambassador pressed Gothabaya on the humanitarian situation in Vakarai, emphasizing that the food shortage faced by civilians trapped there may soon reach crisis proportions. Gothabaya agreed to allow an ICRC assessment mission to Vakarai and, if circumstances warrant, a large convoy of food and supplies. The Ambassador conveyed this commitment to the UNHCR, who will contact ICRC. Gothabaya said the GSL is considering offering amnesty to LTTE cadres who remain in the Vakarai area if they leave their heavy weapons behind. He also agreed to restart long-suspended high-level biweekly meetings on humanitarian access. The next meeting will take place on January 19, which Ambassador will attend. End summary.

COMMITTED TO PEACE

¶2. (C) In a meeting on January 10 with Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, Ambassador said that statements by Fonseka and government defense spokesman Rambukwella had raised concern whether the GSL is still committed to the peace process. Gothabaya sought to walk back Army Commander Fonseka's remarks last week to the effect that the military will liberate the East from the LTTE, then push on to the North. Gothabaya said that Fonseka told him he had been "seriously misquoted." Gothabaya assured us that the GSL was "definitely" pursuing a peace strategy. The object of keeping up military pressure on the LTTE was to induce them

to return to negotiations, he said.

¶13. (C) Gothabaya noted that the Sri Lankan army had refrained from applying maximum force to clear the LTTE out of their remaining eastern stronghold in Vakarai. "We could have just bombarded the place and walked in, but we wanted to get the civilians out first." He told us the army had intentionally opened up gaps in their lines to allow LTTE cadres who wanted to escape to filter out. He estimated that of 3,000 cadres in Vakarai, only 500-600 remained, "not all of them hard core." At some point, the GSL planned to drop leaflets over Vakarai urging the remaining LTTE forces to leave and offering amnesty if they would abandon their heavy weapons. "We want to minimize destruction from the human point of view."

GOVERNMENT TO ALLOW HUMANITARIAN ASSESSMENT OF VAKARAI

¶14. (C) Ambassador welcomed the information about GSL strategy in Vakarai, but noted alarm within the international community about the humanitarian situation there. He requested Gothabaya's authorization for UN and Red Cross access to deliver food and medicine to the population, since the last food was delivered in late November. Gothabaya responded that the November 29 convoy had delivered a three-month supply for a population of over 30,000, and the remaining civilians were now less than half of that) so how could they be running out of food? He said that the ICRC and UNHCR could go to Vakarai whenever they wanted to look into the situation. Ambassador noted that in fact, there had been no humanitarian access to Vakarai since late November. Gothabaya agreed to allow a UN/ICRC assessment mission, and

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if the need were established, another large convoy. (Note: Ambassador contacted UNHCR representative Amin Awad immediately after the meeting to report this development and met with Awad on January 11.)

BIWEEKLY MEETINGS ON HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TO RESUME

¶15. (C) Ambassador also urged the Secretary to reconvene the high-level meetings on humanitarian access with the UN and the international community, saying that participation by both Gothabaya and Human Rights Minister Samarasinghe was crucial. He added that he planned, as current convener of the Co-Chair Ambassadors in Colombo, to attend future meetings personally. Gothabaya agreed, suggesting that it might also be useful for the President's senior political advisor (and other brother) Basil Rajapaksa to participate. (Note: The following day, the next meeting was scheduled for January 19, with the participation of Gothabaya and Samarasinghe.)

NEED FOR RAPID APRC PROCESS

¶16. (C) The Ambassador expressed the hope that the All-Party Representative Committee (APRC) process would soon lead to a viable, realistic devolution proposal that could form the basis for a negotiated settlement of the ethnic conflict. Gothabaya said that was the core of the government's strategy moving forward. The President expected to receive a complete proposal "to consider" by the end of January. Gothabaya said he was personally a little disappointed that the "political people" were taking so long to put together such a plan. In his view, it could have come faster.

¶17. (C) Gothabaya said an appropriate model existed in India's federal system that Sri Lanka could adapt to local circumstances. Further, the reality was that no resolution could come together without India's tacit approval. The Indians would be most likely to accept something similar to their model. However, such a proposal required adequate

debate. In particular, the government could not simply bypass Sinhalese nationalist parties like the JVP; it was important to engage them, because they could cause trouble later. In fact, he confided, he thought that his brother, the President, was making a mistake in distancing himself recently from his former allies, the JVP. Ambassador agreed that the JVP needed to participate, but said they should not have a veto. If the devolution proposals were too watered down, the LTTE would reject them out of hand.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: It was encouraging that Gotabaya, a reputed hardliner, distanced the government from the recent saber-rattling statements by Fonseka and Rambukwella. Still, important elements of the defense establishment appear to agree with the Sinhalese hardliners that a military solution of the conflict (a defeat of the Tigers) is both achievable and desirable. We will need to consult closely with India and other partners, especially the Co-Chairs, in pressing the government to stay on the political track and encourage the LTTE to return to the negotiating table on the basis of a reasonable devolution offer. Such talks are unlikely to be productive (or even to take place) if the current level of hostilities continues.

¶9. (SBU) Septel will report on military cooperation issues discussed with the Defense Secretary.

BLAKE